FOSTERING A SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM CLIMATE TO RE-ENGAGE DISENGAGED LEARNERS

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Abstract

Learner disengagement has emerged as a critical concern in contemporary education, with implications for academic achievement, retention, and long-term educational outcomes. Increasing evidence suggests that disengagement is strongly shaped by classroom climate rather than being solely attributable to learner characteristics. This chapter critically examines classroom climate as a central mechanism for re-engaging disengaged learners. Most times the classroom culture determines the classroom climate. The current attitudes, moods, and feelings within the classroom influenced by the culture constitute the climate. Drawing on recent empirical research and established learning theories, the chapter analyses the relational, instructional, and organizational dimensions of classroom climate and their influence on student engagement. Emphasis is placed on translating research evidence into sustainable classroom practices that foster belonging, motivation, and cognitive investment. The chapter contributes to festschrift scholarship by synthesizing current research while offering contextually grounded strategies relevant to science and technology education and broader teaching contexts.

Keywords: Supportive Classroom Climate, Classroom Culture, Re-engage, Disengaged, Learners

Introduction

Student disengagement remains a persistent and widely reported challenge across educational systems. Manifestations of disengagement include reduced classroom participation, limited persistence on learning tasks, emotional withdrawal, and declining academic performance. Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned deficit-oriented explanations of disengagement that focus on learner motivation or ability, arguing instead that classroom conditions play a decisive role in shaping students' engagement trajectories (Wang, Degol, & Henry, 2019).

Classroom climate has gained prominence as a construct that captures the quality of interpersonal relationships, instructional practices, and emotional safety within learning environments. A supportive classroom climate has been consistently associated with higher levels of student engagement, academic resilience, and achievement across disciplines and educational levels (OECD, 2023; Zee &Koomen, 2016). As such, classroom climate represents a critical bridge between educational research and pedagogical practice. Most times, classroom culture determines the classroom climate.

Classroom culture is the shared atmosphere, values, beliefs, and behaviours in a learning space, defining how students and teachers interact and learn, fostering a sense of belonging, safety, and mutual respect to boost engagement, collaboration, and academic success through established routines, clear expectations, and positive relationships. A positive classroom culture can help increase student motivation, foster positive social development, and improve your relationship with all your students. In addition, a positive classroom culture helps equip your students with essential life skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability.

This chapter examines how fostering a supportive classroom climate can function as a deliberate strategy for re-engaging disengaged learners. By integrating recent empirical findings with theoretically grounded analysis, the chapter advances an evidence-based framework for understanding and improving classroom climate in contemporary educational settings

Factors Influencing Classroom Culture

Several factors can affect a classroom's culture including learner, teacher, classroom, materials, environment, and relationships. Learner-related factors are their demographic factors, perceptions, and images of others, classroom participation, and first language. Factors related to the teacher are background information, teaching knowledge, expertise, and style. Classroom-related factors include seating, size, equipment, and attractiveness. Moreover, the type and quality of materials used in a class can influence its macro culture. Factors related to the

environment include its location, appearance, and being peaceful and silent for better concentration. Finally, teacher-student and student-student relationships in the class can considerably influence its culture.

Characteristics of a Positive Classroom Culture

A positive classroom culture which can produce many positive academic outcomes has a number of features. It is based on respect and belief in learners' ability; the curriculum and syllabus are real-life, negotiated, and based on learners' needs and wants; the responsibility of learning is shared by all; students have voice, agency, and autonomy; the teacher is the role model, facilitator, feedback-provider, and supporter of students; and the classroom environment is peaceful and democratic helping students and teachers perform their best (Hussein in Ali, 2021).

Student Engagement and Disengagement: A Conceptual Framework

Dimensions of Student Engagement

Student engagement is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components (Fredricks, Reschly, & Christenson, 2022). Behavioral engagement refers to observable participation in academic activities, emotional engagement encompasses students' affective responses to learning, and cognitive engagement involves sustained effort and strategic investment in understanding complex content.

Research indicates that these dimensions are mutually reinforcing and highly sensitive to classroom conditions. Consequently, interventions that address only one dimension are unlikely to produce sustained re-engagement.

Meaning of Student Disengagement

Disengagement in this context refers to a student's lack of interest, motivation, or connection to learning, showing up as poor attendance, low participation, indifference to material, and declining academic performance, stemming from personal, social, or institutional factors, and acting as the opposite of engagement on a spectrum. It involves cognitive (not focusing), emotional (losing interest), and behavioural (withdrawing) aspects, often leading to truancy or dropping out. Disengagement could be observed while teaching students in the class or could extend over a period of time beyond lessons. It could be gradual and could also be spontaneous. Whatever the mode, disengagement will only be detected by a passionate and observant teacher.

Why Students Are Disruptive and Disengaged in Learning

Classroom disruptions are a common frustration for educators, affecting both teaching effectiveness and the learning environment. In one instance, a band director

confronted a disruptive student by asking him to teach a lesson on triplets. The student, unprepared, froze and returned to his seat, only to resume disruptive behavior minutes later. This incident raises a broader question: why do students disrupt class, and why do many seem disengaged from learning? While this behavior is often dismissed as a lack of discipline or motivation, the underlying causes are more complex. A combination of disengagement, social influences, fear of failure, and ineffective teaching methods all contribute to classroom disruption. Understanding these factors is essential for educators seeking to foster a more engaging and productive learning environment.

Causes of Disruptive Behavior

Lack of Engagement

One of the primary reasons for student disruptions is a lack of engagement. When students find lessons uninteresting or irrelevant, they may seek stimulation elsewhere, often at the expense of the class. In subjects like music, for example, students may struggle to see the practical application of concepts such as triplets, leading to disinterest. Without personal investment in the material, students are less likely to focus and more likely to disrupt.

Social Pressures and Attention-Seeking Behavior

Classrooms serve as social environments where students seek validation from peers. Disruptive behavior can be a means of gaining attention or asserting social status. Some students entertain their classmates to feel accepted, while others act out to deflect attention from their academic struggles. This social dynamic reinforces negative behavior, making classroom management more challenging for educators.

Fear of Failure and Lack of Confidence

Students who struggle academically often resort to disruptive behavior as a defense mechanism. When confronted with a task they do not understand, they may choose to act out rather than admit their difficulties. The band student who froze when asked to teach the class likely experienced a moment of insecurity, highlighting how fear of failure can manifest as disengagement or disruption. Students who do not feel supported in their learning may develop avoidance behaviors rather than working through their challenges.

Classroom Environment and Teacher-Student Relationships

The relationship between teachers and students plays a significant role in classroom behavior. If students feel disconnected from their teacher or perceive the classroom as overly strict or uninspiring, they are less likely to engage in learning. Conversely, environments where students feel heard and valued tend to foster greater respect and cooperation. Finding the right balance between structure and connection is key to

minimizing disruptions (Matteson, 2025).

Disengagement as an Ecological Outcome

Contemporary perspectives frame disengagement as an ecological outcome shaped by interactions between learners and their instructional environments (Skinner, Kindermann,& Furrer, 2020). Students are more likely to disengage when classrooms are characterized by low relational support, excessive performance pressure, or limited opportunities for meaningful participation. Understanding disengagement as context-dependent shifts responsibility from individual learners to instructional systems and practices.

Theoretical Perspectives on Supportive Classroom Climate

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory provides a robust framework for understanding the motivational effects of classroom climate. The theory posits that learners are more likely to engage when educational environments support autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan &Deci, 2020). Classrooms that offer structured guidance, meaningful choices, and respectful relationships promote internalized motivation and sustained engagement.

Socio-Cultural and Dialogic Learning Perspectives

Socio-cultural theories emphasize learning as a socially mediated process embedded in interaction and dialogue. Classroom climates that prioritize discussion, collaborative problem-solving, and shared meaning-making facilitate deeper engagement, particularly for learners who may be marginalized in traditional teacher-centered settings (Howe & Abedin, 2013).

Achievement Goal Structures

Research on classroom goal structures distinguishes between mastery-oriented and performance-oriented climates. Mastery-oriented classrooms emphasize learning, improvement, and effort, whereas performance-oriented classrooms prioritize competition and normative comparison. Empirical evidence indicates that mastery-oriented climates are associated with higher engagement and lower avoidance behavior's (Huang, 2023).

Empirical Evidence Linking Classroom Climate and Engagement

Recent large-scale and longitudinal studies provide compelling evidence of the relationship between classroom climate and student engagement. Wang et al. (2019) demonstrated that emotionally supportive classrooms significantly predict engagement trajectories across secondary schooling. Similarly, OECD (2023) reports highlight that students' sense of belonging and perceived teacher support are among the strongest predictors of engagement and persistence.

Meta-analytic findings further confirm that positive teacher-student relationships and supportive instructional practices yield moderate to strong effects on behavioral and emotional engagement (Roorda, Jak, Zee, Oort, & Koomen, 2017). These findings underscore the centrality of classroom climate as a lever for educational improvement.

Core Dimensions of a Supportive Classroom Climate

1. **Relational Support and Teacher Presence**

Relational support encompasses teacher's warmth, responsiveness, fairness, and academic expectations. Teachers who demonstrate consistent care while maintaining high standards contribute to classroom climates that promote trust and engagement. For disengaged learners, relational support often serves as the initial catalyst for re-engagement.

2. **Psychological Safety and Error Tolerance**

Supportive classroom climates are characterized by psychological safety, where learners can express ideas and make mistakes without fear of humiliation. Error-tolerant environments encourage intellectual risk-taking and are particularly important in science and technology education, where conceptual change often involves revising prior understanding.

3. **Inclusive Norms and Participation Structures**

Inclusive classroom climates establish norms that value diverse perspectives and equitable participation. Structured discussion protocols, cooperative learning strategies, and transparent expectations reduce exclusionary dynamics and support engagement among previously disengaged students.

Instructional Practices for Re-Engaging Learners

1. **Learner-Centered and Inquiry-Oriented Pedagogy**

Inquiry-oriented instruction positions learners as active contributors to knowledge construction. Empirical studies indicate that inquiry-based approaches enhance cognitive engagement when combined with clear scaffolding and instructional support (Lazonder, Wilhelm, &Ootes, 2020).

2. **Formative Assessment and Feedback**

Formative assessment practices contribute to supportive classroom climates by clarifying learning expectations and providing actionable feedback. Feedback that emphasizes strategies, progress, and effort rather than comparison fosters competence and persistence (Panadero, Andrade, & Brookhart, 2018).

3. **Technology-Mediated Supportive Classroom Environments**

Digital technologies can extend supportive classroom climates by enabling personalized learning pathways and alternative forms of participation. Research indicates that technology-mediated discussion platforms and interactive tools can

increase engagement among students who are reluctant to participate in face-to-face settings (Bond et al., 2020). You can integrate trending and interesting ways of teaching not sticking to the traditional teacher-centred methods all the time. Examples of strategies to explore include Flipped Classroom, Virtual Field trip, etc targeted at restoring and re-engaging the student or students. One major way is to **Gamify lessons.** Gamification (incorporating games) has a way of getting attention of students especially disengaged ones. Games are considered effective alternative to traditional teaching approaches and play vital roles, such as inspiring students to learn, teaching them to love learning and making learning fun. These responsibilities are often neglected in education because students' motivation towards learning and participation in lessons is usually a challenging task for in-class teaching.However, students become more enthusiastic to learn when learning takes place in a fun and interactive way (Ndirika, 2013).

4. Teacher Reflection and Professional Responsibility

Sustaining a supportive classroom climate requires ongoing teacher reflection. Reflective practice enables educators to examine how instructional decisions, expectations, and interactions shape classroom climate and learner engagement. Structured reflection and professional learning communities have been shown to support sustained pedagogical improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

5. The 70/30 Principle: Rebalancing the learning equation

This principle was developed by Victoria Halsey. The fact is that whoever is doing the talking is doing the learning.The 70/30 Principle represents three shifts that, together, turn our traditional learning model on its head. In rebalancing the learning equation, the principle shines a light on the learner, not the teacher; swings the emphasis to how, not what, teachers teach; and stimulates active, not passive, learning. The result is that teachers truly energize and engage learners and, better still, turn learning into action.

- **Learners do 70% of the talking and 30% of the listening.** Learners, not teachers, must be center stage, actively learning. This can't, and won't, happen when the teacher is doing most of the talking and learners are doing most of the listening. Focus should be shifted by the teacher from talking to listening.
- **Teachers spend 70% of their preparation on how they will teach and 30% on what they will teach.** Most teachers, devote more time to preparing the content to teach than to figuring out how to teach that content. There should be a shift of focus from what to teach to how it will be taught, creating various activities and embedding best learning practices into teaching strategies.

- **Learners spend 70% of their time practicing and 30% of their time being taught.** To embed learning, let learners practice. Focus should be shifted from teaching to practicing.

Contextual Constraints and Implementation Challenges

Efforts to foster supportive classroom climates may be constrained by large class sizes, curriculum overload, and assessment pressures. However, research suggests that incremental changes in teacher practices particularly relational and formative assessment practices can yield meaningful improvements in engagement even under constrained conditions.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

The findings reviewed in this chapter highlight the need for educational policies and teacher education programs to prioritize classroom climate as a core dimension of instructional quality. Future research should continue to examine culturally and contextually responsive approaches to fostering supportive classroom climates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fostering a supportive classroom climate is a research supported and pedagogically feasible strategy for re-engaging disengaged learners. By attending to relational, instructional, and organizational dimensions of classroom life, educators can create learning environments that promote belonging, motivation, and sustained cognitive engagement. The enduring contribution of classroom climate research lies in its capacity to humanize teaching while advancing educational effectiveness.

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